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AUTHOR Haynes, Felicity
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ABSTRACT

The accountability system was designed in part to link practice and theory more closely, but educators in the humanities point out that neither everyday experienced nor the affective domain can be accountable in such an explicity system. In the humanities, especially, there is another way of knowing -- unpredictable, unique, often capricious -- which works creatively through juxtaposition and synthesis and which cannot be measured accurately by objective tests. It is a type of perception often termed metaphoric, closely allied with creative insight, and approaches the authentic understanding and commitment desired by existentialist and humanistic educators. Once a teacher becomes accountable to the school, administration, or society, the rich metaphoric perception of the student may be sacrificed for the measurable, objective behavior required by accountability -- and the awareness which arises from metaphoric perceptions which, while they must be expressed through measurable behavior, are not identified with it. (Author/DE)

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ACCOUNTABILITY AND SERENDIPITY

"If we go on explaining, we shall cease to understand each other."
Talleyrand, 1788.

"Truth enters in through the window of irrelevance."
Denton, 1972.

When Bloom published his Taxonomy of Education he reinforced a belief that human thinking can be conceived of as occurring at different levels of difficulty and knowledge (simple recall through comprehension, application, analysis and synthesis). Combined with this came Bruner's conception in Process of Education that any idea can be taught in some form at any age, his pervasive stress on the articulation of core-ideas, and his suggestion that curricula be 'spiralized' to assure the constant return in successively more elaborate forms to these core ideas, and the conception that education was not only a process but a linear process capable of being systematized began to take on a more pervasive and substantive form.

Add then yet another convergent element, a behavioral learning theory as explicated by Skinner, plus dissatisfaction with teacher college programs in the 1960s, and apply a systems analysis from industrial management which demands rigid and totally explicit specification of product and of inputs and outputs for each component of the total activity. According to Zoellner (1972, p.418), such a recipe, if slightly oversimplified, produced Performance-Based Teacher Education, or, at the teaching level itself, the notion of accountability.

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According to accountability, the teacher is not to be assessed merely in terms of theory, but on what the teacher succeeds in doing, in relation to specific competencies made public in advance. Accountability analyses teaching into a set of operations or tasks. The prospective teacher would then be trained to reach "competence" and certified in each of the tasks. The goals of teaching must now be shown to be discrete, definite, identifiable and measurable. The problem is partly a political one, as Forehand's account of the basic principle of the accountability system designed for New York City shows, for it is expressed in terms that clearly emphasise social responsibility:

> The public through different institutions and systems, licenses educators to provide a service to the public's children. The educators assume the responsibility for delivering this service ... The quality of this service is measured by its consequences. When these consequences are undesirable, the persons who are responsible for this system and its services are accountable for changing the system and services so that the undesirable consequences are removed.
>
> (Forehand, 1973, p.S3)

However, the intellectual implications of such a move must also be noted. It must be presupposed that efficient teaching performances can be assessed in relation to the achievement of well-defined anticipated outcomes.

The accountability system was designed in part to link practice and theory more closely, but educators in the humanities were quick to protest that neither everyday experience nor the affective domain with which they were mainly concerned could be accountable in such an explicit discrete system. One can speak of

organizational structures (curriculum) and of organizational processes (method), both of which can be analysed into highly specific quantitative units, and the referents indicated with relatively high degrees of precision, especially in testing reading and spelling abilities, but when one begins to try to measure the vitality, the élan, the quality of the teaching, such a systematized approach quickly becomes inadequate.

In no way is this more clearly exemplified than in the absurd annual situation in which nine of Western Australia's best English teachers argue for over six months over items, questions and correct answers for a twenty-five minute State-wide Objective Comprehension Test required for Matriculation by all school-leavers. There has never been unanimous agreement as to the nature of the questions, even less as to the correct answers, and this is as it should be, for an objective test of a candidate's comprehension of language seems anomalous, to say the least. The examples chosen for questions are not necessarily the best literature, but merely chosen on the ground of complexity sufficient to be able to give plausible distractors and tempting wrong choices. Strangely enough there is a reasonably high correlation between these objective test results and the grades of a one-hour essay-type answer required at the same time, though accountability-directed teachers will be horrified to learn that both writing and grading of essays in this examination is non-directed, purely subjective, an individual affair.

In the humanities especially, there seems another way of knowing, unpredictable, unique, often capricious, which works creatively through juxtaposition and synthesis and which cannot be measured accurately by Objective Tests. It occurs often in the teaching of literature and begins when one puts down the dictionary and ceases to look for the meaning of this or that sign within an "interlocking sterilized system" (Buber, 1953, p.13). It is a type of perception which I shall call metaphoric, closely allied with creative insight, a type of holistic creative, personally-involved knowing, which approaches the authentic understanding and commitment desired by existentialist and humanistic educators such as Buber, Nash, Broudy or Denton. It would seem that such teaching goals as appreciation of Shakespeare or enjoyment of poetry rely mainly on this "metaphoric perception", irreducible to any systematized knowledge and what Broudy (1972, p.6) calls the philetic domain, which like metaphor and unlike didactics, does not lend itself to precise analysis, specification and evaluation.

This is to shift emphasis from the specified behaviour to the individual, to see education as a process and a becoming rather than a state of being, a body of facts, or a correct response. Individual thinking begins and ends with subjectivity, sense awareness, and, as Kant insisted, always partially consists of interpretations. The problem for the accountabilist is whether or not to allow all interpretations as correct, or one only, or which ones to rank in approximate order of success. And in poetry especially, the difficulty of breaking up a total experience, a holistic response, into discrete, identifiable

and measurable items presents almost insuperable problems.

Take, for instance, the accountable aim to try to get thirty-six children to analyze meaningfully the poem Nothing is so beautiful as Spring.. by Gerard Manly Hopkins. Or, since space is limited, to try to assess the response of three children asked to analyze meaningfully a phrase from the poem - "the glassy pear tree leaves and blooms". Which of the following replies would one rank highest? Are they adequate or not?

A; The pear tree is thrusting its leaves and blossoms out so rapidly and with such vitality that it is nonsense to speak of leaves as objects - so Hopkins has made the more usual noun into a verb. The glassiness stresses the fragility of the process.

B: But 'leaves' can't be a noun-made-verb! That would be to distort traditional grammar. A more acceptable interpretation would be the more common one in which the tree is going away. The pear tree leaves its meadow to bloom because it wants to make another place more beautful. And the rhythm of the phrase negates the mood of fragility that you want to ascribe to 'glassy'. The vigor and tensive force of the tree are more important here than the tree's fragility. It is the visual quality of glass that is important here. "Glassy" stresses the shining, translucent freshness of the leaves.

C (Eyes shining): Ooooh ... I don't know what it means, but it's so-o-o beautiful! It reminds me of a newborn foal I saw trying to stand for the first time ... all unfolding and new!

These replies are various, yet A and B achieve about the same level of critical insight. The difficulty in assessing each of the first two is theoretically no greater than that of the math student who solves a mathematical problem neatly but arrives at the wrong answer through carelessness. The absurdity of B's mobile pear tree is partly mitigated by his impeccable line of reasoning and his perception of the inappropriateness of 'fragility' for the tree. Yet how is one to assess the response of C, strange child, her eyes glowing with new personal discoveries? She has failed to answer the question, for she is not analysing the poem, yet in another sense, she has understood it more completely than the other two. Do we want to penalise the teacher for accepting such a response?

Indeed the type of teaching which aims at metaphoric perception seems incompatible with accountability. It is an example of the paradigm clash in education which traditionally opposes humanists and behaviorists, whole and part, individual and society, the inner man and the externally observable man, freedom and determinism, education and schooling. The former values are those of uniqueness, unpredictability, creativity, personal and context-bound relevance, while the latter are those of systematization, regularity and measurability. Without the former, conceptual change seems impossible, for without it, multiple choice answers, with their rigid notion of correct and appropriate responses, seem to lock one into the knowledge systems of the past. As Paul Nash says (1973, p.5) , the metaphoric component consists largely of its irreducibility to any system, and its confrontation with accountability is part of the persistent tension between unique personal meanings that the individual gives to events and the general standards of behaviour that society demands of him.

In trying to defend accountability against humanistic critics such as Broudy and Nash, some proponents have admitted that their goals cannot encompass the whole teaching experience - for instance, Maloney (1972, p.32) says, "An educator is under no constraint to admit that a given array of behavioral objectives exhausts his goals. He may have a more elaborate, subjective set of goals which motivates his work and still accept a set of behavioral objectives as a reasonable, if not perfect, operational definition of certain of his goals." This sounds fine, for it evades the problem of reductionism; however it also considerably negates the avowed aim of accountability as expressed

by Forehand on page two of this paper, namely that the quality of the services of the teacher is measured by its consequences, and that the teacher faces dismissal if the measurable results do not meet required standards.

Even if we do not admit the first part of Morreau's claim that "Nowhere is the need for specificity greater nor the problem more complex than in the affective domain", we could agree with the need to make our expectations of the internalization processes more explicit. In my first year of teaching, accountable to no one but myself, and enthusiastically prescribing the texts I knew and liked best, my goals were non-explicit, if not non-existent. In the following year, I defined some goals more clearly. I expected my class of trainee teachers, after reading Camus' L'Etranger with me, to have a deeper awareness of the amorality of the preschooler, or to understand more fully with Meursault the difference between "indulging in a swim" and "going for a swim". Such explicitness on my part may have resulted in more structured lessons, and made it easier for students to follow me. But I do not know how I could have measured the success or otherwise of such goals. And I would still hope that they got more than that from the novel, so much that was not made explicit - an awareness of the consequences of their individual actions, of the ultimate absurdity of Meursault's life, if not their own, a feeling of at-One-ness with the Algerian landscapes - so much more that could not have been made explicit without destroying the feeling of discovery when each individual perceives these things at his own pace. Even if I wanted to make these

latter goals explicit, even if I could, it would seem impossible to evaluate or measure in any objective fashion the individual achievement of such goals. They may not occur for years after the student has left college. Notions of correctness, grades or standardization seem totally inappropriate here, either to the worth of the teacher or the intelligence of the student, particularly as these classes were mixtures of married women, naive school-leavers, bright academics, mentally unstable adolescents. Their perceptions of Meursault's world were as different as the interpretations of any complex metaphor, all appropriate in a peculiar sense, each accountable to the individual only. My more explicit definition of minor goals made little difference to their total response to the novel.

The question must be raised of course in any account of accountability - accountability to whom? To whom is the teacher ultimately accountable for her results? If to the individual pupil, fine; if to herself, not too bad; but the minute she becomes accountable, in competition for her job with other teachers, to the school, to the administration, to society, I begin to fear a standardization which will count "Blue umbrella" as a category-mistake when applied by a young child to a peacock, rather than the absurdly creative insight it presented in its own context. Is there a "correct response" in answer to a query to describe a peacock? Yes, if the question has been so rigidly defined as to exclude such a rich response as the above. If that's the case, give me serendipidity over accountability any day!

Accountabilists may retort that there are occasions in which it would be more appropriate to demand the "correct" response to "What is a peacock?", for instance, in a zoology class, and that the more creative response would be allowed if the question were framed to include that answer - hence their plea to make the questions more precise. I agree that accountability is a means of measuring competence, which is particularly appropriate in certain didactic areas of education. But, as Rubinoff (1969, p.91) says:

> The achievement ethic, with its emphasis on the importance of phenomena which can be measured and manipulated is therefore an ethic of technology and progress rather than an ethic of humanization. The ethic of humanization ... stresses the importance of phenomena which cannot be measured and manipulated, but which can only be "lived through", experienced and shared - much as one experiences, enjoys and shares a sunset. But of course, such experiences do not lead to progress, social change and economic advancement.

Are the notions of accountability and metaphoric perception as incompatible as the endless rhetorical debates in English teachers' journals and PBTE publications would indicate? I think not. It is safer and more Deweyan to argue that neither is sufficient in itself to encompass the complex nature of the educational process, and that each depends to a certain extent upon the other, though the nature of this interactive relationship is just beginning to be explored by people such as Polanyi, Arnheim and Aldrich. It was hinted at by Wittgenstein when he said (1953, p.143[e]):

> 531. We speak of understanding a sentence in the same sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme cannot be replaced by any other.)

> In the one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something that is expressed only by these words in these positions (understanding a poem).
>
> 532. Then has "understanding" two different meanings here? I would rather say that these kinds of use of "understanding" make up its meaning, make up my concept of understanding. For I want to apply the word "understanding to all of this.
>
> 534. But in the second case how can one explain the expression, transmit one's comprehension? Ask yourself: how does anyone lead anyone to comprehension of a poem or of a theme? The answer to this tells us how meaning is explained here.

Here Wittgenstein seems ~~to be~~ hinting that the first sense of understanding is amenable to accountability in that the replacement follows certain public conventions. But the transmission of the second type type of understanding relies on those conventions at one remove only, just as metaphor relies on the rules of literal language, but at one remove. Comprehension of a poem or theme may be transmitted by some formulation which which is objectively grounded in, and develops from, experience of things, and such comprehension so transmitted may be as measurable as the accountabilists desire, but the transmission which has emerged is the nearest possible representation within a system of a perception which is irreducible to any system, and cannot be said to fit that system precisely.

In the same way, education must be allowed to embrace both the observable goal-specified behaviors required by accountability and the awarenesses which arise from metaphoric perceptions, which, while they must be expressed through observable, measurable behaviour, are not identifiable with it.

Felicity Haynes.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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